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ABSTRACT

On a daily basis, American television and radio audiences are subjected to a stream of broadcast Public Service Announcements (PSAs), each promoting "some kind of social or economic action deemed beneficial" (Stridsberg, 1977). Often, these announcements employ humor as a presentational device to help stimulate the behavioral change needed to bring about "beneficial" action. Existing research literature has addressed communication and marketing strategies which are used to target PSAs to specific audiences, but insufficient attention has been given to the display of humor as a part of this process. Humor is often used in politics, the workplace, and in educational settings when classroom teachers wish to reduce tension and help facilitate learning. A content analysis of more than 100 television and radio PSAs explored the use of humor to shape public opinion and influence behavior. Specific attention was given to announcement verbal, visual, and dramatic elements. Five categories surfaced as being most commonly used in PSAs: analogy, burlesque, caricature, parody, and satire; examples of each type serve to illustrate how these humorous PSAs work. Some suggestions for using humor effectively in PSAs include: verify that the campaign and subject matter are appropriate; identify the target audience and campaign objectives sought; use a single unified theme over and over; employ positive reinforcement of behavior; and bring media gatekeepers and community opinion leaders into the process. (Contains 55 references and a table of the PSAs analyzed.) (Author/NKA)

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Humor as a Presentational Device

in Broadcast Public Service Announcements

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Running head: HUMOR AS A PRESENTATIONAL DEVICE

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Abstract

On a daily basis, American television and radio audiences are subjected to a stream of broadcast public service announcements (PSAs), each promoting "some kind of social or economic action deemed beneficial" (Stridsberg, 1977, p. 24). Often, these announcements employ humor as a presentational device to help stimulate the behavioral change needed to bring about "beneficial" action. Although existing literature has addressed communication and marketing strategies which are used to target PSAs to specific audiences, insufficient attention has been given to the display of humor as a part of this process. This analysis attempts to bridge the gap by briefly discussing the use of humor to shape public opinion and influence behavior. It proceeds to illustrate five categories of humor prevalent in recent TV and radio PSAs. The analysis concludes with seven suggestions for using humor effectively in public service announcements.

Humor as a Presentational Device in Broadcast Public Service Announcements

Comedy is simply a funny way of being serious.

Peter Ustinov

The use of humor is as old as time. Humor (and its dramatic form, comedy) have been employed down through the centuries as a cleansing mechanism for ills both private and public.

As individuals, we use humor to adapt our lives to the pattern of the world. A shared moment of laughter between friends helps ease tension, remove stress and lessen fatigue. Humor allows us to see the world us in its broader perspective, and put the events of our lives in context with others'. Humor serves a similar role in the public sector--by serving as an equalizing mechanism in the public debate of issues. It allows mortals to "triumph over mortality" and engage in the process of "rebirth, restoration, and salvation" (Sypher, 1956, p. 37).

It is difficult to pin down exactly what humor is. It is greater than wit, because it "carries more affection and love, whereas wit more often is hostile" (Gruner, 1978, p. 103). Humor is not instantaneous; it is invented and staged. And yet it can be viewed both as process and outcome--with symbolic and tangible results (Crawford, 1994). It can be verbal, as in "the repartee that sharply levels drama and life to a sheen of verbal

wit" (Sypher, 1956, p. 29). It can also be physical, as in "physical mishaps, pratfalls, and loud collisions" (Sypher, 1956, p. 29).

Humor--and its result, laughter--are both involuntary and voluntary: Laughter, generated by a humorous situation, begins involuntarily but can be suppressed when not socially or situationally appropriate (See Miller, 1988).

As a tool to influence learning, humor can be used both symbolically and literally (Crawford, 1994). It contrasts what would otherwise be incongruent ideas and helps organize concepts (Hudson, 1979). While outlining proper organization, humor can also be used to bring ridicule to concepts outside the newly established order (Berger, 1976).

Although the dramatic form and application of humor have been of interest to theologians and philosophers for thousands of years, it has only been within recent times that there have been attempts to address "the cognitive foundations of humor" (Goldstein, 1976, p. 104). According to Gruner (1978), more than 80 theories have been posited in the effort to explain these foundations--although Gruner also contends "they all borrow heavily from each other and often disagree on very small matters" (p. 29). Recent literature has examined humor in a number of different conceptual frameworks, including but not limited to: Arousal Theory, Incongruity Theory, "Humor as a moderator of life stress", and "Humor as a coping strategy for particular physical impairments" (See Lefcort & Martin, 1986).

The purpose of the current analysis, however, is not to rehash the theoretical basis for humor. Instead, humor will be examined in content--as a specific

communicative approach for a specific purpose--along the lines developed by Berger (1976): As a consequence of elements (humorous story and action), relationships (humorous incongruities established as part of the process) and humor (consequences developed which further the communicative intent).

Humor and interpersonal relationships

Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.

James Matthew Barrie

Though it's difficult to delineate exactly what humor is or how it works, humor has been proven effective as a means for dealing with the stresses and strains of interpersonal relationships. As Berger points out (1993) humor helps "dilute and cover up" hostility, diffuse anger, and downgrade a mis-perceived seriousness of relationships between people. "Thus, a good laugh often functions as a safety valve and helps us deal with anger and anxiety," he writes (Berger, 1993, p. 160).

When speaking specifically of interpersonal relationships, this "good laugh" which helps us deal with anxiety often comes through the sharing of a joke. Although most jokes are shared orally (and, thus, are difficult to capture and analyze), at least one study hints at the use of the joke to allow people the satisfaction of taking part in the understanding of culture through this sharing. In 1976, Winnick published the results of a 20-year study of thousands of jokes--a study showing most jokes dealt with

sex, race, or politics--all serious subject areas which might be difficult to broach without the levelling impact of humor (Winnick, 1976). Winnick's research suggests that shared jokes about touchy subjects introduce levity, reduce social tension and permit participants to explore social relationships. Winnick even suggested there's some cognitive benefit to sharing a silly story. That's because "understanding a joke requires the capacity to meet the cognitive demands and contributes [sic] to the pleasure it provides" (p. 125).

When people talk about delicate subjects, humor may be used as a bargaining tool "to make unofficial arrangements about taboo topics" (Emerson, 1973, p. 270). Emerson discusses at length different business, medical and political environments in which bargaining goes on, allowing participants to informally agree on how much license may be taken under the guise of humor to open up covert topics for discussion--and, then, who will accept responsibility if the guidelines are violated.

Because humor bridges the gap between conversation and physical action, it may also develop in the form of a funny event, described verbally or portrayed in a cartoon. Numerous examples of this type of humor are discussed in Gruner's text (1978). It's Gruner's contention that regardless whether the humor is contained in Rodney Dangerfield's self-depreciating monologue, in Bob Hope's joking with a well-endowed starlet, or through a comic in Mad magazine, two elements must be present: A loser and a sudden loss. "Remove the 'loser' from all these comic situations," Gruner notes, "And the humor evaporates. Remove the 'suddenness' from the 'losing,' and the same thing happens. No more laughter" (Gruner, 1978, p. 33). It should also

be added, however, that even though we may chuckle to ourselves about a joke once told or a funny scene witnessed, since humor is socially-regulated, it can by nature take place only where there are others to participate in it (Fine, 1983). The presence of the loser and the sudden loss in a social environment allows humor to be used effectively to improve relations between people in a number of different environments and situations.

Laughter is the tonic, the relief, the surcease for pain.

Charlie Chaplin

It's now known and "fairly well accepted" that laughter--the byproduct of humor--helps increase the heart rate, boost metabolism and facilitate the exercise of muscles, thus playing an important role in people's physical well being (Berger, 1993, p. 156). Berger even went so far as to cite medical experts who compare humor and the action of laughter to physical exercise, in terms of the overall benefit on the human system as a consequence of stress reduction--contending that clearly "there's a biological aspect to our hunger for humor" (Berger, 1993, p. 156). There have in fact been numerous books and articles written on the importance of humor in well-being--and people who promote its development (See Lee, 1995; Robinson, 1991).

In the political environment, humor can be applied as a tool to advantage particular candidates and issues. A politician, for example, can build his or her own

standing in the policy arena by making "politically correct" humor to illustrate the importance of public support for concerns or issues he or she supports. On the other hand, politicians can use humor to disadvantage the opposition, regardless of whether that opposition takes the form of a person or a policy.

Often, humor is used in the political environment to allow a "public purging or catharsis" through the establishment of a scapegoat, to whom are transferred the sins of man or mankind (Sypher, 1956, p. 34). For many Americans, jokes and humorous stories about Vice President Dan Quayle, for example, allowed him to become a scapegoat for all that was wrong with politics, government, bureaucracy, the Republican party, the wealthy, or the Vietnam war (Moore, 1992). The use of humor in politics is growing, thanks in part to advances in digital audio and video technology which allow images to be manipulated to take humorous advantage of the persons or issues being made fun of. Given the advance of technology, Ludlum believes that Americans should expect increasing amounts of humorous political attack discourse in the future (Ludlum, 1993).

There's gaining recognition of the importance of humor in education, as well, from classroom teachers who employ humor to reduce tension and help facilitate learning (Grow, 1995; Huffman, 1994), to coaches who use humor and laughter to help in athletic training and personal motivation (Burke, Peterson, & Nix, 1995).

For years, humor has been proven effective in the workplace, where it facilitates communication (Blocklyn, 1988), makes people feel more comfortable and productive (Boruch, 1995; Swift & Swift, 1994), and fights on-the-job stress (Vinton,

1989). As a consequence of his study of the research on humor in the workplace, Hudson's 1979 dissertation developed four conclusions about the use of humor to promote effective leadership: (1) Humor can be used to contrast incongruent ideas, by showing how personal behavior is not consistent with acceptable group goals; (2) Humor can be used to demonstrate hierarchy by emphasizing the proper superiority of one person over another; (3) Humor can be used as catharsis, in an effort to reduce personal and organizational tension in cases where people need to admit frustration over an inability to meet organizational expectations; and, (4) Humor puts elements of a situation in congruence, helping people to cope with an ambiguous or changing environment and follow leadership directives.

There have, of course, been those experts who contend humor has no place in advertising. Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, and Parsons cite a number of well-known copywriters and researchers, including industry guru David Ogilvy, who have for decades complained that "advertising should never seek to amuse. . . no one buys from a clown. . . humor only draws attention away from the message intent. . . [and] copywriters should avoid the temptation to entertain" (Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, & Parsons, 1995, p. 44). But despite these opinions, the use of humor in advertising in general--and public service advertising in specific--remains high. In recent studies, more than 90 percent of advertising practitioners said humor could be effective as an attention-getting device, and more than half the respondents said humor could on occasion offer a better way to get the attention of the audience (Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, & Parsons, 1995, p. 44).

Admittedly, the bottom line effects of humorous v. non-humorous displays singularly and across different media are difficult to generalize. "While humor may make ads funnier and more enjoyable," Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, and Parsons note, "it is clear that it is by no means a guarantee for more effective ads (1995, p. 54) (See also similar precautions noted in Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994). But this caveat offers all that much more substantiation for additional research. Because humor is such a common presentational device in advertising, and because humor has been proven in other settings to help people contrast different ideas, define group goals, establish social hierarchies, reduce tension, and cope with change--there's all that much more substantiation for doing everything we can to help understand its role in public service broadcasting. Such is the intent of this work.

Applying humor in the PSA

A public service announcement involves communication presented in conventional formats, "which urges its audience to implement or support some kind of social or economic action deemed beneficial by the consensus of the broad general public" (Stridsberg, 1977, p. 24). This definition is in keeping with Fine's social philosophies for the public service campaign: It must be utilitarian (in that it promotes a behavior, or a curtailment of behavior, to benefit society); It must be paternal (in that the campaign is an intervention of government to prevent harm to people or property); and, it must offer distributive justice (the social sharing of rewards and burdens)(Fine, 1987).

In broadcast public service campaigns, public service announcements (PSAs) are developed and produced for dissemination over one or more of the 18,000+ radio and television stations in the United States. The type and number of stations to which PSAs are offered by any given campaign varies, depending on the targeting of the specific communicative effort. Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of air time is set aside by broadcasters each year for PSAs. (According to Cuneo, 1994, in just the first three months of 1994, $2.5 million worth of TV air time was used by PSAs from just one campaign--the U.S. Centers for Disease Control "America Responds to AIDS" effort.)

It is a quite common perception that PSAs are rarely used, or used only at times when few people are in the audience (a belief held even by noted experts--see Gerbner, 1995). Yet in recent studies, as many as 75% of broadcasters contacted reported using PSAs--and often reported using the announcements in prime time. Many broadcasters reported setting aside more than than 30 minutes of broadcast time each day for PSA use (Swanson, 1995a; Swanson, 1995b).

Research has shown that broadcast PSAs are helpful in delivering general information to general audiences (Hastings, Eadie & Scott, 1990; Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Bosompra, 1989; Stroman & Seltzer, 1989; O'Keefe, 1985), so the simple messages of 'stop smoking', 'wear your seat belt', 'protect yourself from AIDS' and so forth are easy to disseminate through this forum.

For the purpose of this analysis, the author collected and reviewed more than 100 television and radio public service announcements which were delivered to

broadcasters in Oklahoma during 1994 and 1995. Most of the spots reviewed were distributed nationally; the greatest percentage of the national spots were made available through the Advertising Council, a national non-profit group which promotes public interest causes. Each PSA was studied to identify whether or not it used humor as a presentational device. Specific attention was given to announcement verbal, visual and dramatic elements (humorous story and action), relationships (humorous incongruities established as part of the process) and humor (consequences developed which further the communicative intent)(Berger, 1976). Five categories of humorous presentational strategies were identified by the author as being most commonly used in PSAs: Analogy, burlesque, caricature, parody, and satire. Two PSAs from each category were chosen for discussion and review in this report, in an effort to show not only how each spot makes use of its particular humorous form, but how the form is most appropriate to the particular public service message offered.

Analogy: A Humorous effort to link two otherwise incongruous elements.

While an analogy by itself would not be humorous (See Berger, 1993), the analogy used in a humorous context points out the absurdity of engaging in a particular destructive or anti-social behavior. Such is the case with the American Cancer Society's analogous "Animals" television PSA, which casts a negative light on cigarette smoking by visually linking the behavior and attributes of people who smoke with those of barnyard animals.

As the slow, bluesy tune "Bad to the Bone" plays in the background, the "Animals" spot flashes quick, tight visuals of a rabbit, a horse, duck, turtle, cat, a pig, and eight other barnyard creatures--each with a lit cigarette hanging from its mouth. This succession of shots offers a put-down of smokers, by visually linking their behavior to that of animals. A relationship incongruity is demonstrated through the visual use of ignorant animals engaging in a human behavior.

The voice-over narration comes in at the end of the spot:

IF YOU THINK THIS LOOKS RIDICULOUS, REMEMBER, SMOKING IS JUST AS UNNATURAL FOR YOU AS IT IS FOR THEM.

As an additional reinforcement, at this point, the last animal to "smoke"--a chimpanzee--drops a hot cigarette ash on himself, squeals, and jumps out of the frame. We are left with a graphic of the American Cancer Society logo and 800-telephone number.

Another use of analogous humor is found in an American Lung Association PSA titled "Sid Caesar," which attempts to link cigarette smoking with uncleanliness--via the portrait of comedian Sid Caesar costumed as a soot-covered hobo. Dressed in a foppish but filthy top hat and tails, Caesar puffs away on an imaginary cigarette. "Take care of your lungs," he urges, as the camera pulls in for a close-up shot. "They're only human. And if you. . . (makes puffing motion/sound) . . .you ain't gonna be human very long."

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The use of analogous humor is particularly appropriate for anti-smoking campaigns which seek to portray smoking in a negative light (as these two spots do) as anti-social and dirty. In effect, the analogous spots want audience members to see the behavior of smoking as personally repulsive, a connection that wouldn't be as easy to make with behaviors targeted by other public service campaigns.

Burlesque: Exaggeration and ridicule, with a purpose.

Burlesque is a humorous form which involves "a sustained parody designed to ridicule the tragic high style that resembles literary criticism" (Moore, 1992, pp. 111-112). In the public service announcement, burlesque humor comes across as an exaggeration of people's characteristics, to use them in support of the negative. Burlesque works especially well in a PSA which addresses specific behaviors--such as behavior which can be seen as destructive to the environment, something which is addressed in two recent spots.

The PSA "Shower" is a radio spot which portrays an individual "wasting" water in long-running shower. The put-down comes initially by way of making the main character sound like an idiot--because he is both artistically inept and resourcefully wasteful. The spot opens with the sound of water running and splashing in a bathroom shower. Shortly, we begin to hear the voice of a man singing a litany of unconnected and nonsensical verses from songs:

YOU ARE MY BABY, YOU'RE THE KIND OF LADY THAT DESERVES FINE THINGS. THE KIND OF LADY WHO WEARS PEARLS LIKE YOU WERE BORN IN 'EM. YEAH!...

The actions of the main character serve as an initial, implied put-down of his own behaviors. His boorish attempt to verbalize romantic sentiment leads the listener immediately to conclude that this unseen shower-taker is a buffoon. Once this conclusion is established in the minds of the audience, the PSA verifies the conclusion, as the narrator suggests that even listening for a few seconds to this shower-taker is excessive:

IF YOU THINK THIS IS GOING ON TOO LONG, YOU'RE RIGHT. REMEMBER, SHORTER SHOWERS SAVE WATER. THIS MESSAGE SPONSORED BY AD COUNCIL AND EARTH SHARE.

Sypher discusses how comedy or humor allows for the discharge of resentment and other negative feelings as a result of "an unintentional discovery in the social relations of human beings" (Sypher, 1956, p. 51). In such manner, the "Shower" spot allows us to discover (in an unintentional way--as strangers in this un-named man's bathroom) that his type of behavior is antisocial and environmentally unproductive.

A somewhat different theme is offered in the Environmental Defense Fund "Supermarket" radio PSA. "Supermarket" features two young people who are portrayed as having the potential for romance and a life together. A brief courtship and travel through the grocery store leads to stark contrasts between his immediate interests and her long-term concerns. Finally, the spot ends with a humorous reinforcement that long-term environmental concerns are more important than short-term relationship-building:

> **THERE THEY WERE IN AISLE SIX, SHE, BY THE CHOCOLATE FROSTING. HE, BY THE JUMBO STRAWS. THEIR EYES MET. THEY DREW CLOSER.. THEN THEY FLOATED DOWN THE AISLE... SHE TOLD HIM ABOUT PRODUCTS THAT WERE MADE FROM PAPER, PLASTIC, METAL AND GLASS THAT SHE'D BEEN RECYCLING... AND HOW RECYCLING KEEPS WORKING ONLY WHEN SHE BUYS PRODUCTS THAT SAY 'MADE FROM RECYCLED MATERIALS.'**

But the spot ends abruptly with a put-down of the young man for his implied lack of interest in post-consumer recycling:

OH, HOW SHE CARED FOR THE EARTH! AND HOW HE CARED FOR HER! 'YOUR NUMBER?' HE SAID. 'MAY I CALL YOU?' SHE SMILED. 'JUST CALL 1-800-CALL-EDF. ASK FOR A FREE BROCHURE ON BUYING RECYCLED.'

Although we're lead early on to believe the two characters from the narrative will have a future together, those hopes are dashed in the end--as we see that "he" does not share "her" commitment to recycling. As a result of this experience, albeit exaggerated, we may be left with the perception that had "he" made a more demonstrative effort to follow "her" in recycling, their may have been a future for them, beyond the check-out counter.

As with analogous humor, the burlesque form wouldn't work effectively with all types of campaigns and campaign messages. Although the use of burlesque allows a PSA to ridicule certain types of behaviors--planners would not want to use it in any way which would allow audience members to be personally offended because they identified with characters being made fun of. For example, one would not want to use a swishy, burlesque-type homosexual character to promote AIDS education, because use of the exaggerated character would likely cause some audience members to believe homosexuals in general are being criticized. Burlesque is often used in radio spots, so that there's no way for the audience to identify with a visual image of someone being ridiculed--and it's most likely to be successful in campaigns where the

behavior being targeted has nothing to with people's personality types--as with the 'environmentally wasteful' spots discussed here.

Caricature: Bringing behaviors into focus.

Caricature "brings about degradation by emphasizing. . . a single trait which is comic in itself but was bound to be overlooked so long as it was only perceivable in the general picture" (Freud, 1960, p. 257). PSAs which employ caricature humor tend to offer more removed attacks--focusing on the second person and his or her behavior--as argument for or against the issue being argued. As such, in many cases, PSAs which use caricature humor may be perceived as "safer" by the audience, in that they offer a put-down of someone who is not actually present to be subject to the put-down. The "America Responds to AIDS" "Remote Mom" TV spot is a good example of this strategy.

"Remote Mom" features a teenage girl who uses a television remote control device to "fast forward" her mother's talk about sex education issues--but ends the practice when the important issue of AIDS is presented in the dialogue. The spot establishes incongruities between the life and developing interests of the teenager and the repetitive nature of parental narratives about sex. It makes light of the nature of the teenager, who would prefer to "fast forward" through what she perceived initially to be a boring lecture on sex--until the critical issue of AIDS was discovered in the narrative, and made the lecture worth paying attention to.

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In "Remote Mom", we see a middle-aged homemaker sitting on a couch, beginning a "when I was your age. . ." narrative on subject related to sex education. Suddenly, the teenage daughter's arm swings into the picture from the bottom of the frame. Holding the remote control device, the arm engages a "fast forward" of the mother--who proceeds to speed through the lecture as a household VCR would speed through a disinteresting program. The "fast forward" stops when the mother mentions the word "AIDS"--indicating that "AIDS" is something the teenager has not heard before in the context of this discussion.

Another use of caricature humor is offered through the 1995 "America Responds to AIDS" TV PSA entitled "Automatic." This widely-distributed TV spot opens with a bedroom scene--and two people engaged in an embrace under the covers of the bed. Momentarily, a dresser drawer opens. A "latex condom" appears from the drawer. The condom proceeds to walk across the bedroom and slide under the sheets and into the bed. Afterward, an announcer's voice reminds viewers that condoms promote "safe" sex.

The use of caricature humor is used in AIDS spots to allow PSAs to be critical of 'second person' type people who are not 'real' and are not really present to be subject to a put-down. In "Remote Mom," for example, a dull, dumpy, stereotypical mother, the bane of every teenager, is caricatured into a robot operated at her daughter's whim. But the audience knows the mother is not a <u>real</u> person, so the audience doesn't really identify with her, or feel bad about her being 'operated' by her daughter. In "Automatic," a condom--an impersonal object--is caricatured into a living

being to protect the implicitly foolish people shown clenched under bedcovers in the background. Because viewers cannot clearly see the characters in the bed, viewers can be critical of them without taking it out against them personally. Caricature humor works well in PSAs which hope to attack behavior without forming a personal attack against people who carry it out--quite the opposite of the analogy spots, for example, which want smokers to be seen as dirty, anti-social people. (Imagine the uproar which would be generated if analogous spots were created which attempted to portray sexually active people who didn't use condoms as dirty and anti-social!) So, in cases where sexual behavior is involved--and planners don't want audience members to personally identify with the traits or characteristics of characters--the caricature form works well.

Parody: Tearing down, to build up.

Parody is "artistic work that broadly mimics an author's characteristic style" by striving to "make fun of the original work, or, at least, try to push the stylistic pretensions of the original to extreme lengths" (Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994, p. III, IV). Public service announcements which use parody "achieve the degradation of something exalted. . . by destroying the unity that exists between people's characters as we know them and their speeches and actions, by replacing either the exalted figures or their utterances by inferior ones" (Freud, 1960, p. 257). Such is the case with the Arts & Humanities "ZZZZZ" PSA, in which well-known comedic actor Robin Williams provides what might otherwise be perceived as offensive characterizations of

the arts and arts supporters, in order to demonstrate that arts is wide-ranging and varied in its appeal.

Through its interpretation and sound effects, the 60-second "ZZZZZ" PSA makes light of a common perception that arts events are fit only for highbrow audiences. The spot encourages listeners to accept this stereotyped perception--and explore the possibilities for arts and humanities outside the ordinary.

Interestingly enough, the PSA does not attempt to persuade us that the arts events portrayed aren't in fact excessively 'highbrow'--and that the people portrayed as audience members aren't exceptions to the rule for being present in the audience at those events. What the PSA does do is present the argument for diversity of opinion and taste:

A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK THAT, TO APPRECIATE CULTURE,

YOU'VE GOT TO ENJOY THINGS LIKE THIS--

(Natural sound: Opera soprano hitting high note, followed by glass breaking)

OR THIS--

(Natural sound: College lecturer in large hall, giving a history lesson in boring monotone while writing on a chalkboard)

WELL A LOT OF PEOPLE RESPOND TO THOSE THINGS LIKE THIS--

FABULOUS!

OTHER PEOPLE GO--

(Natural sound: snoring/cough) **IS IT OVER?**

FOR THOSE OF YOU IN THE (Natural sound: snoring) **CATEGORY, YOU CAN'T EXPECT EVERY CULTURAL ACTIVITY TO APPEAL TO EVERYBODY! THAT'S WHY 23,000 ARTS AND HUMANITIES GROUPS CALLED THE NATIONAL CULTURAL ALLIANCE OFFER YOU SOMETHING EVERYBODY LIKES--A CHOICE!**

The spot ends with Robin Williams' urging to "explore what's available in your community" in the arts by calling a national 800-telephone number for additional information. "The arts and humanities--there's something in it for you," he tells us.

One of the more recognizable parody campaigns is that involving "Vince & Larry, the Crash Test Dummies." These walking, talking mannequins have been used in TV an radio spots for several years, to encourage people to buckle their auto safety belts. Vince & Larry have also shown up as "live" community safety representatives

and as "Crash Test Dummy" toys marketed internationally in the name of safety belt use.

In the 1995-96 radio campaign, Vince & Larry have been turned into singers who carry their safety belt message to the tune of popular songs. Their "On the Road Again" radio PSA features Vince & Larry singing a duet to the tune of the famous Willie Nelson song, illustrating the physical effects of a car crash when the passengers are not wearing safety belts. A humorous incongruity is established as the characters graphically discuss deadly highway accidents in a playful, lighthearted manner. The dummies' parody makes the tragic action of the car crashes sound more like slapstick comedy (after all, dummies aren't people and cannot really hurt); the designated effect is to have audiences reason that the simple act of wearing a seat belt is more desirable than the risk of near-term injury or long-term suffering through avoidable accidents:

> Vince: **ON THE ROAD AGAIN. YOU DON'T BUCKLE UP, YOU'RE ON THE ROAD AGAIN. RIGHT THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD AND ACROSS THE MEDIAN. BUCKLE UP OR YOU'RE ON THE ROAD AGAIN.**
>
> Larry: **ON THE ROAD AGAIN. HERE COMES A SEMI ROARIN' DOWN THE HIGHWAY. YOU CAN'T MOVE A LIMB. NOW THOSE 18 WHEELS ARE GONNA TEACH THE HARD WAY. THERE'S JUST ONE WAY.**

Vince & Larry: **STAY OFF THE ROAD AGAIN. IT REALLY HURTS TO LOSE A POUND OF SKIN. WHO WANTS A ROAD BURN FROM YOUR TOES UP TO YOUR CHIN? BUCKLE UP OR YOU'RE ON THE ROAD AGAIN!** (Refrain)

Because the music is upbeat and the copy is genuinely funny--and most importantly, because "Vince & Larry" do not represent real people who can be hurt by accidents--the listener is persuaded to forget the possible "reality" of a life threatening car crash. Since the listener has "forgotten" this possibility, it's very easy for the PSA to draw the listener into the slapstick routine, and be persuaded of the importance of wearing seat belts to prevent such an event (never mind the fact that seat belt use alone does not prevent accidents, injuries, or death on the highway).

In other "Vice & Larry" spots, the dummies tell us in equally graphic terms about dangers posed from failure to use safety belts. The "Larry's Lament" radio spot, for example, allows Vince & Larry to sing a duet (along with a chorus of back-up singers) focusing on the consequences of failure to use child safety seats. While the dummies' parody again makes the tragic action of a car crash sound more like slapstick comedy, "Larry's Lament" differs from others in the series in that it specifically mentions "heaven" as an after-accident destination for children and suggests hell as an after-accident destination for the adults who failed to use the child safety seats:

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Larry: **MY PRECIOUS PET, SAID 'DON'T FORGET, TOMMY'S CAR SEAT, WHEN YOU GO.' BUT I PAID NO MIND, AND NOW I FIND, THERE'S ONE THING I MUST KNOW.**

Vince: **DO LITTLE ANGELS HAVE CAR SEATS IN THEIR CHARIOTS IN HEAVEN? IF MY LITTLE ANGEL USED HIS, HERE ON EARTH TODAY HE WOULD BE SEVEN. I DIDN'T THINK TO BUCKLE HIM IN JUST GOIN' IN TO TOWN.**

Chorus: **HE'S ON THE HIGHWAY UP TO HEAVEN...**

Vince: **I'M ON THE ROAD THAT GOES STRAIGHT DOWN.**

Chorus: **FORGET THAT SAFETY SEAT, YOU'RE ON A ONE-WAY STREET, THAT ONLY GOES STRAIGHT DOWN.**

Fine (1987) categorizes the "Vince & Larry" campaign as a parody of the "starving baby appeal" in which "nonprofit agencies market ideas and services designed to ameliorate human suffering" (p. 93). Although Fine also points out that the objectives of such a campaign are usually short-term, it seems clear that "Vince & Larry" has taken on a life of its own through merchandising--and may extend well beyond other public service campaigns of its genre.

The use of parody is actually quite common in public service announcements, because parody humor builds off of either specific or general pre-existing work or works which "are fully developed and which are widely recognizable" to audiences (Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994, p. V). The "ZZZZZ" spot, for example, parodies stereotypically stale and stuffy academics and arts supporters--generalizable characters which require no explaining because audiences have seen them countless times before in motion pictures, television and other dramatic performances. As such, the parody form is the closest of the humorous forms to drama in the public service announcement--it allows the spot to 'create' a whole new set of rules and situations for the already 'familiar' characters shown delivering the message.

So, in "ZZZZZ," Robin Williams' comedic interpretation of the stuffy arts supporters can be done very quickly--allowing lots of time in the PSA to blow away those stereotypes and talk about the tremendous "choice" offered by tens of thousands of different groups which are all contrary to our preconceived notions. In the "Vince & Larry" spots, the old taboos of not talking about death and injury are blown away by the wisecracking dummies who come to life to talk frankly about self-protection in an automobile. Parody works well in any situation where stereotypes need to be shattered, and where there's sufficient opportunity to set up characters to lead the audience into new interpretations of life and living.

Satire: The use of sarcasm to expose human folly.

Satire is a humorous form in which "human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit" (Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994, p. IV). Satire generally is language-based, and can employ many different techniques, including comparison, exaggeration, insult, or ridicule (See Berger, 1993). Satirical attacks are generally very specific in nature, and would generally include "a sharply cutting or sneering remark" (Random House Dictionary, 1980). They differ from parody in that the satirist is less concerned with creating parallel structures to the original work.

The U.S. Department of Transportation's "It Won't Miss You" radio PSA features narration and railroad sound effects to establish the danger to motorists of driving unaware at railroad crossings. Humorous incongruities are established through the use of a narrator who "struggles" to be heard over the sound effects of a train whistle and signal bells--and describes a train which "won't miss you" if you're in its way. The spot relies on the "struggle" as described above, as well as somewhat caustic admonishing of motorists about this unstoppable train.

The "It Won't Miss You" spot is similar to the "Vince & Larry" spots in that it makes light of a deadly situation. "It Won't Miss You" differs, however, in that its humor is brief, much more subtle, and accomplished with straightforward "serious" words (rather than the intentional humor and song used by the Crash Test Dummies):

IF YOU'RE DRIVING WITH THE CAR WINDOWS UP, YOU MAY NOT HEAR THIS--

(Sound effect, railroad signal bells)

AND YOU MAY MISS THIS--

(Sound effect, train whistle approaching)

BUT IF YOU END UP ON THE TRACKS, THE TRAIN WON'T MISS YOU. THERE ARE SOME DRIVERS WHO JUST DON'T SLOW DOWN TO LOOK AND LISTEN AT A RAILROAD CROSSING. . . WHEN YOU APPROACH A RAILROAD CROSSING, ALWAYS-- EXPECT A TRAIN.

While the "Crash Test Dummies" are not real people--and thus are rhetorically removed from the reality of the potential crash, in "It Won't Miss You", the narrator is a real person. As he speaks, he fights to be heard over the continuing sound of the bells and the train whistle. This, added to the blunt narrative, creates a spot which is satirical yet very serious.

Another example of satire can be seen in the American Lung Association "Morgan Fairchild/David Copperfield" TV PSA, which uses two celebrities and a magic trick to make a satirical attack against cigarette smokers. The two well-known entertainers conduct a "disappearing act" magic trick, in an effort to verbally attack cigarette smokers and visually illustrate that smokers' bodies are lost to dangerous

fumes. Humorous incongruities are established through the use of the trick itself--as the center part (lungs) of Morgan Fairchild "disappears" and is replaced with cigarette smoke The PSA suggests that people who choose to smoke are foolish for willingly allowing their healthy lungs to disappear in a cloud of smoke:

> Copperfield: **WHEN YOU SMOKE, LOOK AT WHAT YOU PUT INTO YOUR LUNGS--**
>
> (Smoke appears from center of box)
>
> Copperfield: **DAY AFTER DAY. AFTER A FEW YEARS, YOUR LUNGS HAVE TO WORK HARDER AND HARDER TO BREATHE. UNTIL FINALLY YOU CAN'T BREATHE AT ALL. SMOKING ISN'T HEALTHY. PERIOD.**
>
> Fairchild: **PLEASE, TAKE CARE OF YOUR LUNGS. AFTER ALL, THEY'RE ONLY HUMAN.**

Because the exaggeration and comparison methodologies common to satire have the potential for working well on television--a medium which, by its very nature stereotypes and classifies people and behaviors (Comstock, 1989)--satire is one of the most common humorous devices seen in public service announcements. But, like

caricature, it has to be done carefully, so that no one in the audience can personally identify with any of the characters whose traits are being exposed as foolish.

Criteria for using humor effectively in the PSA

As a result of past research, and the author's review of dozens of humorous spots for this report, seven overall recommendations can be offered for using humor effectively in the PSA:

1) Verify that the campaign, the PSA, and the subject matter are appropriate.

It's all too easy to rush headlong into a public service campaign which can be justified by its planners but not by the community intended for service. Who in society has the authority to define a certain social or medical phenomenon as a "problem"? Is a campaign being planned for something that some people won't see as a problem? In whose best interests are PSAs and campaigns implemented? Who will establish the criteria for a PSA's success or failure, and on what basis will criteria be established? Everything is subjective. It behooves the planners of any campaign--and especially a campaign where humor is used as a powerful communications device--to consider all the issues, from everyone's viewpoint. In so doing, PSAs will be created which stick to promoting causes which are deemed by consensus of public opinion to be proper, concentrate on advancing the public interest, build on the public's existing understanding of a particular situation or problem, and offer believable messages with appropriate humorous intent (See Atkin & Freimuth, 1989; Stridsberg, 1977).

Also, since so many social and medical outreach campaigns now overlap in emphasis (e.g., American Lung Association v. American Cancer Society, "America Responds to AIDS" v. Pediatric AIDS Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund v. Earth Share, etc.) campaign planners would be wise to see whether the issue they hope to raise is not already part of some other group's agenda.

2) Identify the PSA's target audience.

Ideally, the campaign which generates a PSA will address specific communities of people, rather than a general audience, so as to most effectively deliver the message to the people most likely to be affected. Unfortunately, this is not always done. The "America Responds to AIDS" campaign, for example, developed PSAs which were perceived by many as addressed to general audiences. For that reason, people within the demographic groups most likely to need the AIDS preventative information (teenagers, minority group members, homosexuals) did not perceive messages intended for them and may have felt "invisibility" or "shame" (See Cuneo, 1994, p. 40).

An equally important consideration when identifying the target audience is to correctly estimate the sensitivity of the intended audience and the general public to the topic (See Emerson, 1973) and the way the topic is addressed in the PSA. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control ended up in the middle of a public controversy in 1994, after it authorized release of an "America Responds to AIDS" radio PSA featuring Red Hot Chili Peppers singer Anthony Kiedis. In the spot, Kiedis, claiming "I'm naked right

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now," discusses the importance of properly applying and using latex condoms. Kiedis had been convicted in 1990 of misdemeanor charges of indecent exposure and sexual battery (Neely, 1994), a fact which supposedly was unknown to the C.D.C. at the time of the spot's release to the media. The resulting public uproar caused the Kiedis spot to be dropped from the campaign (Borzillo, 1994; Neely, 1994). [While the C.D.C. contended that the Kiedis PSA was canceled prior to its release and that "it never aired" (Borzillo, 1994, p.86) the author is in possession of a copy of the spot which was received by a radio station and authorized for airplay prior to the publicity over Kiedis' criminal convictions. The author is also in possession of a follow-up letter from the campaign urging the station to discontinue broadcast of the spot.]

When the target audience is clearly identified, and the other public(s) sensitivities and concerns are taken into account--and dealt with honestly by campaign planners--planners are more likely to successfully develop a humorous strategy which will appeal to many, and be offensive to few.

3) Identify campaign objectives and audience action sought.

Depending on the objectives of the sponsoring group, public service campaigns and the resulting PSAs can either focus on a specific condition (e.g., heart disease) or a general concept (e.g., 'eat right and exercise for good health'). The action sought from the audience will also vary, depending on the objectives of the sponsoring group. Some campaigns are carried out to increase public awareness of a health concern. Other campaigns are carried out with the intent of getting action from

the audience--action to either take precautions against a health problem (e.g., AIDS prevention) or to seek treatment for a problem which may already exist (e.g., getting checked for diabetes). Some PSAs exist not to increase awareness or bring about precautions, but to raise money to fight diseases or support treatment (e.g., the annual funding campaign for St. Jude's Children's Hospital). It's important for the developers of any campaign to identify exactly what the objectives are, especially when humor is involved--since humor has the potential for being applied inappropriately, and its intent has the potential for being misunderstood.

An additional, and equally important concern, is the targeting of specific behaviors for change, based upon their analysis of the "specialized segments of the overall audience" to which PSAs are addressed (See Atkin & Freimuth, 1989, p. 135). This is especially true when the PSAs deal with behavior which is highly personal--such as the discussion of sexual activity, which has been linked to "deep biological and psychological drives and desires" (Robert, William, Michael, & Sherry, 1986, p. 15). One would certainly not want to use humor in any way which might be perceived by the audience as a put-down, or ridiculing of those behaviors or the people who hold them (See Zillman & Stocking, 1976).

Here again, the more that is known about the specific behaviors targeted and who holds those behaviors, the more will be understood about <u>how</u> to target them, and by what humorous means they may be addressed.

4) Use a single unified theme, repeated over and over.

While research shows that, generally, sustained exposure is critical to the success of a PSA--sustained exposure of a single humorous message can quickly reduce the impact of that message. An article in Advertising Age contends the media often use PSAs "when they're fresh and newsy, then get bored, and all too soon set them aside so they can pick up on the next 'hot' public service campaign" (Why PSA causes falter, 1994, p. 22). Campaign planners can maintain sustained exposure but avoid the potential boredom which could result from constant repetition of a single humorous spot by creating a series of PSAs--perhaps a series of 'episodes' or vignettes along the lines of the popular "Vince & Larry" seat belt campaign (a campaign so successful it spawned a complete line of toys and merchandise based on the two main characters and their exploits). In so doing, the overall message retains its 'life' in the media marketplace, and the humorous intent is heightened through broadcast of subsequent new PSAs from the same campaign.

[One of the most entertaining sets of PSAs reviewed by the author was the "Max Moore: Detective in Moneytown" series, developed as part of a campaign by Citibank to educate college-age radio listeners about personal finance issues related to independent living. The series featured eight radio PSAs on such topics as budgeting, credit card use, credit worthiness and consumer fraud, all voiced by "Max Moore," a '40s style self-proclaimed "gumshoe." Though entertaining and informative--and backed by a toll-free phone number for listeners who want to learn more--the

campaign PSAs were not included in this analysis because of obvious commercial ties to Citibank and its Mastercard/Visa programs.]

5) Employ positive reinforcement of behavior, supported by PSA humor.

Public service announcements are often designed to tell people what not to do: 'Don't smoke', 'don't forget to buckle your seat belt', 'don't get AIDS', etc. But communicating the negative can be self-defeating. Extensive research has shown that using negative reinforcement--or, telling people what not to do, and rewarding them for not doing it, instead of telling people what actions are good and acceptable, and rewarding them for those actions--doesn't work, over the long term. People exposed to negative reinforcement have been known to behave in ways contrary to the message--as a sign of independence from the message (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975; Zivan, 1987). Use of negative reinforcement brings about limited self-discipline and self-control, and less opportunity for personal performance effectiveness and organizational goal attainment. It also can permanently suppress positive behaviors related to "decision making, creativity, or problem solving" (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975, p. 121).

A more successful strategy is one which takes the high road: By telling people what behaviors are good and appropriate, and then demonstrating those appropriate behaviors in the PSA (See Maibach, 1990). Appropriate humor can then be used to support appropriate behaviors (as in "Automatic" and "It Won't Miss You"), or as a

means of ridicule for incorrect actions alluded to--and people who carry them out (as in "Shower" and "On The Road Again").

6) PSA verbal, textual and visual symbols must agree.

Campaign planners should not neglect the importance of having all elements of the PSA 'mesh' into a cohesive product. In the recent past, media watchers have been critical of some campaigns for lack of attention to symbolic detail--cases in which the visuals either did not agree with the message, or were contrary to it (Myrick, Trivoulidis, Swanson, Lam, & Al-Qhtani, 1992; Swanson, 1993). In other campaigns, it was found that PSA characterization and announcement structure actually perpetuated the social problems intended for alleviation (See Gerbner, 1995).

It would be wise for planners to spend a lot of time and energy researching the target audience, with specific attention to the verbal, textual and visual symbols understood and used by the audience--and to consider the seven "best predictors" of audience attention, recall, and believability proposed by Freimuth (1985): A straightforward presentation of information, a statement of social benefits or performance, a moderate to high emotional appeal, use of demonstration sequences of "slice of life" vignettes, limited number of characters (actors), the use of an audio slogan, and multiple audio repetition of subject.

7) Bring media gatekeepers and community opinion leaders into the process.

Unfortunately, it's common for public service campaign planners to fail to learn anything about the opinions and policies of the gatekeepers who control access to the media--the individual radio and television station managers. Research by Swanson (1995a; 1995b) into the attitudes and opinions of gatekeepers regarding AIDS PSAs found most broadcasters surveyed had never been personally contacted by an AIDS prevention campaign representative. Furthermore, few respondents could name any campaign which had ever made a personal contact to learn about station PSA policies. The need to learn about the policies of the individual gatekeepers is especially critical when humor is involved in the message, since humor can be so easily mis-interpreted in different community and/or cultural settings.

Campaign planners need to actively initiate contact with gatekeepers to learn who controls access to the media, what those individuals' attitudes and policies are, and, most importantly, what the gatekeepers think would be the most effective means for delivering the message to members of their audiences.

It's also important to note that many media managers are hesitant to initiate the social movements which might be called for through new or innovative public service campaigns (See Tichenor, Rodenkirchen, Olien, & Donohue, 1973). Because these media managers are often willing to get involved only after other media have started the ball rolling, PSA planners should have as much information as possible about broadcasters and their relationships with their peers.

And, because "mass media messages alone are not effective" (Overton, 1989; Abstract), previous research makes it quite clear that the development of a successful campaign goes far beyond simply producing an informative or humorous PSA. Campaign planners also need to reach out to the cultural, religious and social services agency representatives and community opinion leaders in the geographic areas targeted (See also Edgar, Hammond, Freimuth, 1989).

Summary

The world in which we live is a dangerous place. We ourselves have created many of its dangers: Pollution, crime, forest fires, AIDS. No one could rightly expect that any combination of public service campaigns and announcements would rid the world of all its risks, but at the very least, these efforts offer hope: Hope that people will see, take to heart, and then act on positive messages to make life better.

Unfortunately, as the use of PSAs grows, the author has not seen a corresponding growth in campaign planners' demonstrated ability to gather information about their intended audiences and media gatekeepers, and create messages which have a greater potential for success.

The full effect of humor in advertising, in general, has not been widely studied and seems difficult to predict (Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, & Parsons, 1995; Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994). The application of humor in public service campaigns is particularly misunderstood--even by the people who purport to be public relations experts. A quick review by the author of more than a dozen recent college public relations,

promotions and broadcast writing textbooks turned up only a few remarks--and no serious discussion--of humor as a presentational device in the PSA. The one text which did mention the subject placed humor as a form separate from all others, and then muddied the waters even more by misconstruing humorous forms: Smith's text on public relations writing contends that "Humor is (a) format that can be useful, though often PSA topics do not lend themselves to levity and comedy" (Smith, 1996, p. 347)--as if humor, levity, and comedy were one in the same.

The author doesn't consider himself 'a champion of humor' (although he can be unabashedly witty in faculty meetings and in other appropriate settings); he does not see this paper as an attempt to persuade campaign planners to use adopt humor where it is inappropriate, or where planners otherwise would employ different means of delivering public service information. Rather, he sees this as an attempt to illustrate in small measure how humor is viewed and how some humorous PSAs have been put to use to bring important issues into the public arena, to generate more dialogue about public service campaigns, their announcements and presentational strategies, and, to bring about more discussion of humor and its various forms as a viable option for making more effective 'connections' with audience members in the future.

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Table

Humorous Presentational Device	PSA	Time	Medium	Dramatic Action
Analogy	"Animals"	:30	TV	Uses animals, shown smoking cigarettes, to visually make the analogy that smoking is ignorant behavior.
	"Sid Caesar"	:30	TV	Uses '50s comic Sid Caesar dressed as a foppish but filthy hobo, puffing away on an imaginary cigarette, to visually equate smoking with dirty people and anti-social behavior.
Burlesque	"Shower"	:30	radio	Uses put-downs of an unseen shower-singing buffoon to illustrate that long showers are personally unsatisfying and environmentally counter-productive.
	"Supermarket"	:60	radio	Uses a burlesque portrayal of romantic interlude between two shoppers to illustrate the value of long-term environmental concerns over short-term personal interests.
Caricature	"Remote Mom"	:30	TV	Uses technological distortion to caricature a teenager's mother; illustrates that teenagers are likely to "fast forward" through parental discussions of sex education, unless parents can drive home the severity of the AIDS threat.
	"Automatic"	:30	TV	Uses a "latex condom" which comes to life to protect people (shown clenched under the bedcovers) from sexually-transmitted diseases.
Parody	"ZZZZZ"	:60	radio	Uses comedic interpretation and sound effects to make light of stereotypes about arts/cultural events and supporters; suggests in fact that "the arts" are as varied as the 23,000 community groups across the country which sponsor such events.
	"On the Road Again"	:60	radio	Uses familiar "crash test dummy" characters to put new lyrics to a popular country music song; the dummies' parody is designed to have audiences reason that the simple act of buckling a seat belt is more desirable than the risk of near-term injury or long-term suffering in an accident.
Satire	"It Won't Miss You"	:30	radio	Uses narration and railroad sound effects to establish the danger to motorists of driving unaware at railroad crossings. Humorous incongruities are established through the use of the narrator struggling to be heard over the sound of an approaching train whistle and signal bells--and describing a train which "won't miss you" if you're in its way.
	"Morgan Fairchild/ David Copperfield"	:30	TV	Uses two well-known entertainers conducting a "disappearing act" magic trick, to verbally and symbolically assail cigarette smokers and smoking.

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